

North Korea may be preparing to test missile

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SEOUL, South Korea — A top South Korean national security official said today that North Korea may be setting the stage for a missile test or another provocative act with its warning that it soon will be unable to guarantee diplomats' safety in Pyongyang. But he added that the North's clearest objective is to extract concessions from Washington and Seoul.

North Korea's warning last week followed weeks of war threats and other efforts to punish South Korea and the U.S. for ongoing joint military drills, and for their support of U.N. sanctions over Pyongyang's Feb. 12 nuclear test. Many nations are deciding what to do about the notice, which said their diplomats' safety in Pyongyang cannot be guaranteed beginning this Wednesday.

Tensions between Seoul and Pyongyang led South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff to announce today that its chairman had put off a visit to Washington. The South Korean defense minister said Thursday that North Korea had moved a missile with "considerable range" to its east coast, possibly to conduct a test launch.

His description suggests that the missile could be the Musudan missile, capable of striking American bases in Guam with its estimated range of up to 4,000 kilometers (2,490 miles).

Citing North Korea's suggestion that diplomats leave the country, South Korean President Park Geun-hye's national security director said Pyongyang may be planning a missile launch or another provocation around Wednesday, according to presidential spokeswoman Kim Haing.

During a meeting with other South Korean officials, the official, Kim Jang-Soo, also said the notice to diplomats and other recent North Korean actions are an attempt to stoke security concerns and to force South Korea and the U.S. to offer a dialogue. Washington and Seoul want North Korea to resume the six-party nuclear talks — which also include China, Russia and Japan — that it abandoned in 2009.

The roughly two dozen countries with embassies in North Korea had not yet announced whether they would evacuate their staffs.

British Foreign Secretary William Hague suggested that North Korea's comments about foreign diplomats are "consistent" with a regime that is using the prospect of an external threat to justify its militarization to its people.

"I haven't seen any immediate need to respond to that by moving our diplomats out of there," he told the BBC on Saturday. "We will keep this under close review with our allies, but we shouldn't respond and play to that rhetoric and that presentation of an external threat every time they come out with it."

Germany said its embassy in Pyongyang would stay open for at least the time being.

"The situation there is tense but calm," a German Foreign Office official, who declined to be named in line with department policy, said in an email. "The security and danger of the situation is constantly being evaluated. The different international embassies there are in close touch with each other."

Indonesia's foreign affairs ministry said it was considering a plan to evacuate its diplomats. A statement released by the ministry on Saturday said that its embassy in Pyongyang has been preparing a contingency plan to anticipate the worst-case scenario, and that the Indonesian foreign minister is communicating with the staff there to monitor the situation.

India also said it was monitoring events. "We have been informed about it," said Syed Akbaruddin, spokesman for India's external affairs ministry. "We are in constant touch with our embassy and are monitoring the situation. We will carefully consider all aspects and decide well in time."

Seoul and Washington, which lack diplomatic relations with the North, are taking the threats seriously, though they say they have seen no signs that Pyongyang is preparing for a large-scale attack.

Kim Jang-soo said the North would face "severalfold damages" for any hostilities. Since 2010, when attacks Seoul blames on North Korea killed 50 people, South Korea has vowed to aggressively respond to any future attack.

South Korean Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Gen. Jung Seung-jo had planned to meet with his U.S. counterpart, Gen. Martin Dempsey, in Washington on April 16 for regular talks. But tensions on the Korean Peninsula are so high that Jung cannot take a long trip away from South Korea, so the meeting will be rescheduled, a South Korean Joint Chiefs officer said today. The officer spoke on condition of anonymity, citing office policy.

The U.S. Defense Department has delayed an intercontinental ballistic missile test that had been planned for this week because of concerns the launch could be misinterpreted and exacerbate the Korean crisis, a senior defense official told The Associated Press.

Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel decided to delay the test at an Air Force base in California until sometime next month, the official said Saturday. The official was not authorized to speak publicly about the test delay and requested anonymity.

In recent weeks, the U.S. has followed provocations from North Korea with shows of force connected to the joint exercises with South Korea. It has sent nuclear capable B-2 and B-52 bombers and stealth F-22 fighters to participate in the drills.

In addition, the U.S. said last week that two of the Navy's missile-defense ships were moved closer to the Korean Peninsula, and a land-based missile-defense system is being deployed to the Pacific territory of Guam later this month. The Pentagon last month announced longer-term plans to strengthen its U.S.-based missile defenses.

The U.S. military also is considering deploying an intelligence drone at the Misawa Air Base in northern Japan to step up surveillance of North Korea, a Japanese Defense Ministry official said today.

Three Global Hawk surveillance planes are deployed on Guam and one of them is being considered for deployment in Japan, the official said on condition of anonymity because the official was not authorized to speak about the issue.

North Korea successfully shot a satellite into space in December and conducted its third nuclear test in February. It has threatened to launch a nuclear attack on the United States, though many analysts say the North hasn't achieved the technology to manufacture a miniaturized nuclear warhead that could fit on a long-range missile capable of hitting the U.S.

North Korea also raised tensions Wednesday when it barred South Koreans and supply trucks from entering the Kaesong industrial complex, where South Korean companies have employed thousands of North Korean workers for the past decade.

North Korea is not forcing South Korean managers to leave the factory complex, and nearly 520 of them remained at Kaesong today. But the entry ban at the park, the last remaining inter-Korean rapprochement project, is posing a serious challenge to many of the more than 120 South Korean firms there because they are running out of raw materials and are short on replacement workers.

Nine more firms, including food and textile companies, have stopped operations at Kaesong, bringing to 13 the total number of companies that have done so, South Korea's Unification Ministry said in a statement today.

North Korea briefly restricted the heavily fortified border crossing at Kaesong in 2009 — also during South Korea-U.S. drills — but manufacturers fear the current border shutdown could last longer.